

A question with no easy answer

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MY son never wanted to speak anything but English, he did not want to be different from his friends. He also spent a large part of his youth at boarding school and so lacked any continuity in speaking with me in Swiss German.

On the other hand my daughter, the younger of the two, was continuously with me and soon spoke *Schwyzerdütsch* and English with equal facility as I always made a point of talking in both languages.

She further improved her knowledge by studying German at school and by working in a hotel in Switzerland for almost a year. She was very happy when towards the end of her stay guests sometimes asked from which part of Switzerland she came and no longer as they did earlier from which country.
– **Esther Birch-Girsperger.**

LIKE most other mothers I also started with the good intention to speak *Schwyzerdütsch* but it is so much easier to speak in English.

Mark, who is 20, speaks a very nice *Schwyzerdütsch* with a lovely accent. It certainly pleases "Grossmutter". He is in the Merchant Navy, and on his first ship he met up with an officer who has a Swiss wife and they used to speak *Schwyzerdütsch* together much to the amusement of the Chinese crew.

Jan, who is 18, simply refuses to speak it at all and will pretend he does not even understand.

Corinne (17) speaks very well and will use her second language in company when she only wants me to understand. She is off to Biel in the summer holidays to work in a veteri-

SHOULD we speak *Schwyzerdütsch*/Français/Italiano/Romansch to our children or not? That was the question I put in a recent issue of the Swiss Observer. And I was extremely pleased that so many of our readers have taken the trouble to put their thoughts on the subject onto paper.

We all seem to agree that it would be desirable if the child spoke our native dialect. But it may not be very easy to achieve that goal, as a cross section of your letters show. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us. – Marianne Hill-Moser.

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nary's surgery, so we shall hear a few more new expressions when she comes back.

As to my husband, we start to talk *Schwyzerdütsch* shortly before any holiday in Switzerland and he certainly gets by in a sort of *Schwyzer-English* with a lot of waving of hands and feet. All our relations and friends think he is great fun.

All the children have spent holidays in Switzerland with friends and relations where they had to use German, so I suppose that is the reason why they do speak with a Thurgauer dialect. Although Corinne has been to our doggie friends in the *Emmental* and found it rather difficult to get used to it.
– **Doris Lendon-Ludwig.**

OUR children are grown up now, but when they were small I was often asked if I spoke to them in French, or *Zueridütsch*, and if not, why not. The simplest answer seems to be that you must do what comes naturally.

My own mother-tongue is French, although I grew up

in Zurich. My parents were both *Jurassiens*, so it was natural that they should speak French together and with their children. I am keenly aware of the problems this created for me once I started school. I felt an outsider, and was often treated as such (*Französetubel*).

My primary school teacher went to a lot of trouble to help me, and by the age of nine I seemed as proficient as my contemporaries in handling written German, which is, of course, a new language for Swiss children also. However, my difference left me with an inferiority complex which marked me until my late teens.

At any rate I was determined that our children should not be burdened in this manner. It seemed important to us that they should feel at home and be able to identify with their English friends.

I remember being struck by Dr Spock's advice to parents to allow their children to conform to the values and outlook of their peer group as much as

possible. This was certainly not how my parents had looked at it. In my case, my inheritance has left me divided between the French and German cultures, so it seemed easiest to use English with my children, since I also speak it with my husband.

While they were small we had very few Swiss visitors, nor could we afford to travel, so I would have been the only foreign influence on them. Later they both learnt French at school and came to understand it sufficiently to follow a conversation.

It is a different matter for *Zueridütsch*, of which they only know a few words. However, since most of our Swiss relatives also speak English, or French, communications have not posed any great problems.

I am afraid our children are no linguists. One has a good ear and is willing to have a go in French regardless of grammar. The other, who ought to know better, is most reluctant to speak it.

How many successful bilinguals are there? And what has it cost them? What we try to give our children must also depend on how and where we see their future.
– **Theres Grey.**

OUR older boy's first experience at school was slightly traumatic. Though he had had plenty of contacts with local children he had started to speak rather late. In consequence he had difficulty in expressing himself and in reading. By now, except for an occasional stammer, all these problems have disappeared.

Our younger son speaks abundantly and very often both languages together, such as starting a sentence in French and finishing it in English.

On the whole the experience is proving quite successful. They use French mainly with us, their parents, and sometimes between themselves. When very young they did not understand that their grandparents and our Swiss friends could also speak French and insisted on speaking English to them.
– **Marie-Florence MacDonald-Cullaz.**

● There will be more letters on this subject, which causes concern to many Swiss families in Britain, in next month's *Swiss Observer*.

OPEN LETTER

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the *Swiss Observer* should move away from its familiar surroundings and traditional set-up. But I believe your father and Fred Stauffer, who was at the editorial helm for well over 30 years, would agree that the time has come for changes to be made.

I know that the hope of yourself and others that another philanthropist would turn up and carry on the good work has been dashed, perhaps not least

due to the diminishing resident Swiss community. But the main thing is that the paper continues and that its future is safeguarded as much as anything can be in this uncertain world. This is a relief to many of your compatriots who care, not least to Elsie Stauffer who supported her husband so staunchly.

As member of the Commission on Information in Berne, which hatched the idea of our special issues four times a year, I was aware of the difficulties and

feared that at best the paper would be reduced to a quarterly periodical made in Berne, as for so many other Swiss communities abroad.

Now the *Swiss Observer* can go on, and you dear Oscar, may enjoy a well-earned release; you have made your last great gift to the colony as a publisher – handing over a going concern.

Thank you for everything, and may God bless you and Ildé in a less onerous future.
– Yours,
Mariann.